
NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY IN COMPUTER GAME STUDIES

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Resumo:

Deveria o conteúdo da narrativa de jogos continuar tergiversado por narratologistas? A discussão teórica deste artigo está voltada para a narratologia de jogos, tomando diferentes abordagens de pesquisas baseadas em uma perspectiva funcional de jogos. A segunda parte do artigo faz uma alusão a pesquisas realizadas na área, de modo a discutir como o texto pode ser examinado por narratologias e qual a contribuição da análise deles.

Palavras-Chave: Cibernarratologia; Estruturalismo; Pós-Modernismo; Ludologia; Narrativas Selvagens

Abstract:

Should the narrative content in computer games remain untouched by narratologists? This article suggests a theoretical groundwork for computer game narratology putting forward that the different research approaches should be based on the games functional perspective. The second part of the article explores the elusiveness of such text, how it can be examined by a narratologist and by which analytical means.

Keywords: Cybernarratology ; Structuralism; Postmodernism; Ludology ; Savage Narratives.

Introduction:

My original intent in this article was to first sum up and comment on the ludologists/narrativist disputes. After establishing the benefits and shortcomings of this debate, my second goal would have been to suggest a research practice concerning games and their narrative content. Fortunately, I read Frasca's *Ludologists love stories, too* (2003), which saved me a protracted statement on the imperative of mutual understanding among game scholars and

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the practice of such settlement. Notwithstanding that Frasca's views may not be shared by all game scholars, he thoroughly clarifies the confusion surrounding ludologists' standpoints and preferences concerning narratives in games (Frasca, 2003)² which grants our article here an easy access to offer a perception on game analysis and in the same time gets to keep the focus on the second goal without having to defend this attempt against the charges of "colonialism" (Aarseth, 1997).

This article is inspired by Barry Atkins's (2003) handling of computer game's narrative methodology in which he seeks to keep his study manageable by avoiding abstractions and generalizations. Atkins maintains that this could be achieved by locating computer game fiction in relation to other forms of fiction. Furthermore, the choice of method in this research is influenced by Murray's moderation:

"Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other."
(MURRAY, 2005: 3)

Functional disposition of methodology:

A computer game is a multipurpose tool with different functions associated to its compound and constantly developing design. These various functions were the main reason behind the confusion on how computer games could be approached. This question has been debated thoroughly during the prolonged course of *Ludology vs. Narratology Debate*. The question that consumed a huge pile of research papers: Do computer games narrate? must have a simple analogous equivalent, which would most probably be: Do paper and ink narrate? Confusing a medium with its content strongly corresponds to confusing a tool with its function/s. The simplest comparison we might come up with is that a

² Frasca's point is that ludologists do not dismiss narratives but favor other tools for game analysis.

surveillance monitor for bank security can be used as well to watch the *Swan Lake Ballet*.

While communication and simulation are two defining attributes of computer games, they also generally define the game's functionality and purpose. It is obvious that computer games (in the sense of a tool/medium) are utilized by industry, education, consumers and other parties as means of – respectively – product testing, learning, entertainment, and many other purposes including and not limited to military simulations, just to name a few³. Consequently, game studies should be all pragmatists' common ground under the law of functionality⁴. On this note, narratologists should seriously attempt to get over this disorienting step by practically focusing on the narrative content of computer games only when the latter is regarded as a carrier by which fiction is communicated. Yet, this is not an absolutist counterstrike announcement from the literary camp. Storytelling is one of the many functions of games, and settling for the mere satisfaction of drawing parallels and substantiating analogies with printed novels and films would certainly propel the research towards amateurism. There is much in games than narratives, and there is much more in game narratives than proving they are narratives. After all, it depends on which aspect one's research would zoom in for comprehensive results. This method stands away from whether or not game narratologists should have a discipline called computer game narrative studies, as it should be noted that the focus on one element does not mean ignoring other elements. One of the supportive arguments for a practical and reasonable approach to game narratives is Murray's: "[students] ...should no longer be confused by the appearance of an either/or choice between games and stories, or distracted by an unproductively sectarian discourse." (Idem: 3)

³ While playing is apparently the umbrella purpose of games, Dormans refers to The Forge's – an online gaming forum – classification of play styles, "...it identifies three different types or styles of play called Narrativism, Gamism and Simulationalism." (Dormans, 2006). These three types of play represent three different player intentions and aspirations for what he/she can gain from the play.

⁴ Attention to functions underlines Pearce's research on games (Pearce, 2004).

Multidisciplinary Approach:

Multidisciplinary research⁵ constitutes a methodological tank in which research is given the best means and concepts from a pool of techniques. Such approach is necessary to scrutinize a multilayered and expanding phenomenon like computer games. Accordingly, narratology shouldn't be the only discipline used to analyze narratives in computer games, as this would be such a grave limitation exactly as the very indiscriminative rejection of it. This also applies to the methodology employed. Since there is no room for absolutism and clean cuts in a multidisciplinary research world, it is logical that applicable concepts should be drawn from more than one methodology or discipline so as to match the versatility of the computer games' medium as long as the focal integrity of the research is maintained. Game narrative studies must neither limit itself to narratology and film studies – and correspondingly – nor only to structuralism when handling narrative mechanisms within computer games.

With the single concentrated purpose of examining cybernarratives as prior to describing the communicative nature and implications of their medium, achieving the latter task becomes essential to the success of research. That is, cybernarratology should open the door for concepts borrowed from ludology, literary theory⁶, and visual arts, as well as to structuralist and postmodern tools when exploring the manifest traditional narrative aspects in games (such as focalization) and how they fundamentally mutate under the influence of the virtual medium. This methodological hybridity is advocated by Dovey and Kennedy (2006): “[The] methodological hybridity allows us to expand and develop an understanding of the computer game that include both the

⁵ “Multidisciplinary research takes place at the edges of traditional disciplines and across traditional subject boundaries [sic] Experience shows that multidisciplinary research works best when scientists from different research backgrounds are able to work together free from discipline or structural barriers. (Research Councils UK, Retrieved 2008)

⁶ “While philological approaches have often been dubbed "narratologist" in the past, thereby reducing the discipline to just one area of research, recent work in this field suggests that there is more to literary theory than just narratology” (Kücklich, 2003).

structuralist analysis ...and an understanding of the way that the game is mediated through cultures in the form of representation, narrative, and intertextuality.” (86). Dovey and Kennedy are in favor of a method that takes game play and game’s formal qualities as medium into account in order to move ahead to arguing about the “wider meanings” (89) of narratives.

Elusive Narratives:

Game narratives do resist any classification and refuse to surrender to structuralist narrative theory⁷, but they are not “*savage narratives*”⁸. They do seem and sound monstrous in their operation, but they are framed in traditional patterns. One could be easily allured to use Gibson’s expression: “*monstrous narratives*” (Gibson, 1996, 236) in order to describe game narratives, but this wouldn’t fit as good as it sounds since simulative narratives are highly structured unlike most chaotic postmodern ones. Marc Laidlaw, writer for Valve Software (Half-Life) duly notes: “As far as narrative structure, games are often rigidly structured” (qtd. in Whitlock, 2005). Game narratives are neither savage nor monstrous; they are just elusive, or, in Eric Zimmerman’s expression (2004, 155), “slippery”, which is due to that all the narrative building blocks are in motion and crossing the borders of a multilayered medium to other media back and forth.

Game narratives only seem monstrous since their narrative elements are not static. Besides, these elements are physically negotiable by the reader who is theoretically unpredictable. Notwithstanding this very explicable nature of narratives under the influence of such a complex medium, we have to keep in mind that all in a computer game is governed by a program code that represents a structure, a governance structure. The interdisciplinary procedure advocated by this paper is an empirical one. In a forthcoming paper we will explore a

⁷ See Herman and Vervaek (2005, 111)

⁸ See Currie (1998) qtd. in Herman and Vervaek (2005, 111)

practical combination of methods that is meant to be flexible enough to accommodate game narratives' elusiveness. Our proposed endeavor puts the structural school of analysis as the first approach to be employed, then to be rectified later with postmodern revisions for the following reasons:

1. Structuralism provides a preliminary blueprint approach for a test analysis of an intangible text (in the sense of that text's resistance to any rigid categorization). It is true that the narrative text in computer games is volatile, but in the same time it is very structured; a multilayered composite ordered in an unfixed number of different sections (play sessions, different types of in-game cinematics, graphic interfaces, and more⁹ which are all at once separate, connected, and overlapping, and which depend on the varied resources and their different relational associations to the narrative. The narrative content in games is very systematized by definition since it can only function according to the rules of a program code (although this concept can be misleading, which we will get to in a later paper explaining a possible confusion with hypertext theory regarding *non-linearity*). On that matter, when Herman and Vaervack refer to the choice between structuralism and postmodernism in general, they rightly state that "a combination of classical systematization and postmodern relativization appears to be the best approach right now" (Herman & Vervaeck, 118).
2. Structuralism provides a universal terminology that has been tested, debated and criticized, and for which malfunctions several solutions are proposed.
3. Postmodernism does not provide any system for narrative analysis, but only fresh insights and realizations¹⁰. It is not hard at all to argue that postmodernism is still under construction and does not provide practically or terminologically for narrative theory. Therefore, this paper suggests Patrick O'Neill's (1994) compromise of *compound discourse* (Fictions of Discourse, 60)

⁹ Next morning a programmer might design a new game feature that would influence and add to the weight of the discussion.

¹⁰ "That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism" (Aylesworth, 2007)

along with ludological visualization. However, this concept calls for its own paper.

4. It is unscientific to blindly reject the most universal school in narratology (structuralism) before actually trying it based on a mere speculation that it is not perfect, and on that matter, one should always remember that most systems tend to have bugs. The laboratorial common sense necessitates that the most basic and common treatment is first to be applied on a new phenomenon, while it does not make sense that experimental treatments should have testing priority in regards to new phenomena.

Conclusion:

The rationale of the functional methodology presented by this paper is to justify focusing on narratives in games without resolving to a total separation from ludology. Whether or not narratives are the dominant aspect in games does not concern this research. As far as narratives (as one of many game elements) are concerned, different methods of literary theory along with relevant crossdisciplinary approaches should be tested for game narrative analysis.

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